this crooked posture (is all you've ever known)
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by eveningbreeze

Summary

Fiona heads off with a wave, and he's left where he started - staring through a window into a nearly-empty kitchen, looking in on a life was never his and never will be. Inside, the robian sets bacon on the stovetop to fry and starts making toast, blissfully unaware of the hedgehog just outside. It's hard to tell on a robot, obviously, but he looks perfectly content with his life. Happy, even.

Pathetic.

Or: Scourge avoids his problems, Fiona is exasperated, and Jules is mostly oblivious.

Notes

i wrote this whole thing in a span of about 5 days :pensive: as u can maybe tell i have a lot of feelings abt that one conversation btwn scourge and jules...there is so much potential here and im sad we never got to see it

as far as timeline goes- this would probably take place in the pre-boot universe about six months or so after scourge & co escape from zone jail. the destructix are camping out on mobius for the time being to avoid drawing zonic's attention and new mobotropolis has wrapped up the ixis naugus/metal sally arcs.

cross-posted on tumblr and fanfiction.net @goosewhisker if you'd rather read there

It's the early hours of the morning. So early, in fact, that it shouldn't even technically be called *morning* because it's still basically nighttime and no one sane is up right now.

Which is probably why the idiotic robian is up at five o'clock in the morning, puttering around in the kitchen and making breakfast. There's literally no reason for it. It's not like he can eat anything, after all, and his stupid son lives off chilidogs, so *he's* not going to eat it. And his stupid wife isn't getting up for like two hours, so *she's* not eating it either. See? Idiocy.

Yet another thing that their universes seem to have in common.

"What are you *doing?*"

Scourge almost shrieks - key word is *almost*, 'cause he's too cool to scream like a dork - and tackles Fiona into the bushes. "Shhh!"

Fiona splutters indignantly and a second later her fist bounces off his jaw, which, *ow*. "Are you nuts? Get off me!"

"Shhhut up!" Scourge throws a quick glance over his shoulder at the window. No one's come outside to investigate, so hopefully no one's heard. He rolls off her a second later. "You wanna get us *arrested*, woman?"

"Hey, I'm a legal citizen of this universe!" Fiona protests. "If anything, it's *you* who's getting arrested, Mr.-Snooping-Through-Other-People's-Windows. That's so *creepy*."

"We're both wanted criminals here; if we get caught, we're going down together," Scourge points out, graciously ignoring her last comment. "And anyway, I'm... gathering intel."

Fiona snorts. "Pull the other one, Scourge. That's not gonna work on me." Crossing her arms, she adds, "You've been *gathering intel* every night for the past week. And I know you're technically the same person, but watching Sonic sleep is *really weird*."

"I'm not watching *him*," Scourge snaps before he can help himself.

"Oh?" Fiona's eyes glint and it's then that Scourge realizes he's slipped. "Then who are you watching?"

"Uhhh..." Scourge fidgets while trying not to look like he's fidgeting. "No one. I'm just passing through, not watching anything. Why'd I want to do that anyway?" He forces a laugh. "So lame."

Fiona regards him with a flat stare. "Your fingerprints are smudged all over the window."

"*What*?" Scourge whips around to check the window. He'd been so careful not to leave any traces of his visits, but-

Waitaminute.

"Very funny," Scourge growls into his gloved hands. Fiona snickers.

"Look, if you don't want to tell me, I won't make you," she says, standing up and brushing the dirt off her pants. "But I'll find out eventually. And if this new obsession of yours endangers yourself or the team, I'm going to put a stop to it."

"Yeah, yeah," Scourge mutters, waving her off. "Get lost."

"Mhm. We still on for that movie night?"

"'course. See you there, babe."

Fiona heads off with a wave, and he's left where he started - staring through a window into a nearly-empty kitchen, looking in on a life was never his and never will be. Inside, the robian sets bacon on the stovetop to fry and starts making toast, blissfully unaware of the hedgehog just outside. It's hard to tell on a robot, obviously, but he looks perfectly content with his life. Happy, even.

Pathetic.

Scourge kicks the side of the house, suddenly incandescently furious with everything. Inside, Jules looks up in surprise, but Scourge is already gone.

"I need to stop," Scourge says later. The movie is over - some samurai flick that Simian had picked out and Lightning had ruined with his constant nitpicking - and they'd gone out for ice cream afterwards (read: robbed that nice gelato place downtown). Getting used to having teammates again is... something, Scourge supposes. But it's not completely terrible.

"You need to stop," Fiona agrees. She's texting furiously, slouched into

the ratty couch in their current hideout with Scourge's head on her lap.

"It's just weird seeing him alive, is all," Scourge tells the ceiling. "That's all it is. Like, when you see something weird, and you just gotta look at it. It doesn't mean anything."

"Are you trying to convince yourself or me?"

"Not tryin' to convince anyone. I'm just saying what it is."

Fiona sets down her phone with a sigh. "Look, you gotta stop hurting yourself like this."

Scourge sits up a little too fast. "Hurting myself? What? Babe, have you forgotten who you're talking to? I'm Scourge the Hedgehog, I don't *hurt*."

Fiona gives that all the acknowledgment it deserves, which is none. "I told you about the... the prison, when I was a kid," she says. Scourge falls silent. "I went back there a few times, after I was big enough to handle myself. There wasn't a reason, really. I just thought I had to see it. And it sort of helped the first time - I cleaned out all the bots and made sure that place couldn't hold anyone ever again - but after that, I just went back again and again because it made me hurt and that felt good. Because I was hurting anyway, and being able to make it worse when I wanted to made me feel like I could control it."

Scourge doesn't say anything.

"But that wasn't true," Fiona says. Her voice shakes just a little, and without thinking Scourge takes her hand. It's stupid (sentimental) but she smiles faintly. "I wasn't healing or in control or anything. I was just hurting myself. And I can't stand watching you do the same."

"Babe," Scourge begins hoarsely.

"Tell me it's not the same," Fiona says flatly. "Or tell me- tell me that if I went back to that prison and crawl through that tunnel I dug with my own hands and relive every moment of the hell I went through, that you wouldn't stop me. That you would watch me do it."

He can't tell her that. He can't tell her that and she knows it.

Scourge looks away.

Fiona sighs and runs her hand along his spines. "He's not your dad, Scourge," she says quietly. "He's an entirely different person. Hurting yourself isn't going to make anything better."

"Okay," Scourge agrees. "Okay." Then, after a moment, "Thanks, babe."

Fiona smiles again, and there's something so sad about it he squeezes her hand again (uncool, but it's not like there's anyone else to see it). "No problem, hun."

He goes back again the next day.

This time, the wife is there too.

Scourge crouches in the massive oak tree beside the window, pretending he doesn't feel like a massive creep. His green fur blends neatly with the leaves, rendering him all but invisible to any casual observers, particularly when it's not-quite-light. With luck, it'll fool robian eyes as well.

Anyway.

Scourge doesn't remember his mother. She was simply never in the picture; whether because of death or divorce he never knew. Generally, he suspects the latter - months upon months of neglect, of being constantly passed over and ignored for the more important burdens of the state and *the good of the people* - yeah, he can see how a divorce would happen. Not that he'll ever know now.

The hedgehog in the kitchen doesn't look neglected. She throws her arms around the robian, not seeming to mind the cold metal, and dances around him as they prepare breakfast. The robian, in turn, leans into her touches and takes advantage of a moment of distraction to dab pancake batter on her nose. It's *disgusting*. Scourge gags.

Part of him wonders what he's gaining out of this. Hiding in a tree, spying on some losers and their dumb domestic life - not exactly fitting behavior for the former king of Moebius, after all.

It's not... It's not that Fiona's *right*. It's not like he's hurting himself - like he told Fiona, he's Scourge the Hedgehog. He doesn't *do* that emotions garbage. That kind of wimpiness is more Sonic's thing.

(Let alone that Fiona had said it happened to her. Let alone that she's usually right, and that she's one of the strongest people he knows.)

He's just curious. That's all. Nothing more, nothing less.

(The voice in his head sounding suspiciously like Fiona whispers, *Yeah, right.*)

Inside the kitchen, the robian starts flipping pancakes. For a second, Scourge tries to imagine his own father like that: Jules the Hedgehog, king of Moebius, flipping pancakes in a frilly pink apron and laughing with his wife. Arguing over who gets to wake up their son. Talking and hugging and laughing and *living* -

- and the illusion dissipates. Jules wouldn't set foot in a kitchen. He had servants to do that kind of thing, just like he had servants to take care of his son.

Scourge drops down from the tree branch and lands lightly on his feet. He's done here. He slinks off into the streets, hiding his face from the strengthening sunlight as synthetic laughter rings out behind him.

"Hey, Simian," Scourge says a few days later.

Simian continues lifting weights without slowing. "Yes?"

Scourge likes Simian, as much as he likes anyone. The ape is steady and has a solid head on his shoulders, and while it's kind of a drag most times, he does occasionally have helpful bits of advice. And when he goes loose on the battlefield, he can be *really* fun to fight alongside.

So that, plus the fact that Hawk doesn't care and Lightning would probably make fun of him and he'd rather eat his own shoes than talk to Fly, makes him Scourge's best option.

Scourge swings his legs back and forth as they dangle off the chair and tries to think of a way to broach it. He just needs to be subtle, right? "When was the last time you saw your parents?"

And maybe that wasn't super subtle after all, because Simian stops in the middle of his workout session (he *never* stops in the middle of a workout session) to stare at him. It feels... extremely uncomfortable, actually, wow. Scourge hops up and starts his stretches (anything to avoid looking back).

"When I last left my village, I was eighteen," Simian says at last. He sounds thoughtful, which is never a good sign. "That was several years

ago... six years, I believe."

"That long, huh?" Scourge moves to quad stretches. "You're pretty old, man. Slowing down anytime soon?"

He's rewarded with a sharp grin. "I'm not *that* old. Though I suppose most people look slow next to you."

"Damn straight!"

"Why do you ask?"

And that's the issue - when even Scourge isn't sure why he's asking. He takes his time answering. "Oh, you know... just curious. Ever think about 'em?"

There's another ponderous silence, which mostly just succeeds in making Scourge antsy. Well, antsi*er*.

"Sometimes," Simian says. "But I am a dedicated member of this team. You can rest assured of that."

And that's nice, but it's not what he's *asking*-

"...but that's not what you're asking, is it?"

Scourge freezes. Is he just that transparent? Why can everyone suddenly read his mind now? "What're you on about, man?" he deflects.

Simian shakes his head. "I do miss them, sometimes. It is natural for children to miss their parents."

"Not me!" Scourge laughs, and if it comes out a little too sharp, well, who's to blame him?

"Of course," Simian says, sounding vaguely indulgent. "Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Uh, sure," Scourge lies. "A little heavy on the oversharing, but it's cool." And then he scarpers, because if super speed's good for anything it's for escaping uncomfortable conversations. Simian doesn't say anything about it later, and thank *Chaos* because he doesn't think he'd be able to face Fiona if she ever got wind of that little talk.

The next time he's in town, Scourge picks up a new set of woodworking knives and leaves it on Simian's equipment. It's not like

he's gone *soft*, buying presents for his friends or whatever, Scourge tells himself. He's just... buying Simian's silence. It's a bribe, is all.

(Simian saves him some extra ice cream the night after and that's that.)

It is natural for children to miss their parents, Simian had said. Ha! As if. Scourge hasn't missed his old man a day of his life and he's not about to start now.

... that'd carry more weight if he wasn't spending two or three mornings a week moping outside their kitchen.

Scourge sips his frappe and pretends he's not sulking. Right now, he's outside some random diner in New Mobotropolis in full disguise, complete with a trenchcoat, fedora, and sunglasses. He was honestly expecting someone to stop him before now - this kind of garb is about as suspicious as it gets - but no one seemed to even notice anything out of the ordinary. Idiots.

Fiona would *kill* him if she knew the kind of risks he's taking - which, of course, is why she doesn't need to know.

Scourge checks the time. Seven o'clock, meaning the wife is just getting up and they're having breakfast right now - Chaos, he has their entire morning schedule memorized, doesn't he? Fiona was right, he is obsessed. Scourge slumps over the table and buries his head in his arms.

He can still turn this around. Knowing their schedule is useful, from a strategic standpoint; he could threaten them, take them hostage... even kill them. Sonic would be taken completely offguard. It would be simple. Easy. The *smart* thing to do.

Scourge's groan is only partially muffled by the table.

"...you alright, son?"

What-

Something electric shoots up his spine. Scourge's claws dig into the edges of the table with a *crunch* as he bolts upright. And there, before him, with a look so familiar but so foreign in his eyes is-

He's not the same.

His skin is metallic where it should be flesh, plated where it should be furred. His eyes burn a bright pixelated red when they should be brown. That stupid tuft of fur on his head is shining chrome that glints under the bright sun.

But the way he stands - colored though it is with a hint of a soldier's posture - that proud tilt of his chin, the gentleness in his hands as they reach out to him -

It's Jules.

It's different from seeing him in that dim, lamp-lit room. In the daylight, the differences are exaggerated - and so are the similarities.

For a second, Scourge can only see his dad standing there.

He reacts on instinct. Scourge rears back and smacks Jules' outstretched hand away. "Don't touch me!"

Jules straightens up, virtual eyes widening with shock. "I'm- I'm sorry, it looked like you were unhappy. I only meant to-"

"Well, don't," Scourge spits. "Get lost."

Jules looks at him longer and then, for some Chaos-forsaken reason, doesn't leave. Why isn't he *leaving*, Scourge thinks furiously, and only realizes he's breathing heavy when his breaths start coming too fast and harsh in his ears. Jules says something, but the words don't make sense and he can't tear his gaze away from the polished metal. Beneath his fingertips, the table starts to splinter.

And then there's warm hands on his shoulders, and a steady voice in his ears, saying, "Listen to me. Do you want me to leave?"

Nothing comes out of his throat. Scourge shakes helplessly. He wants him to leave, he wants him stay, he wants to never see him again. He wants his *dad*.

Jules must take it as permission to stay, because he doesn't leave. The grip on his shoulders is a solid, unmoving presence, and Scourge can't help but lean into it. "I'm going to count slowly. Try to match your breathing to my voice - it's alright if you can't. Starting now. One, two..."

For some completely batty reason, he tries, and it helps some. His breathing is a little too fast and a lot shaky, still, but it settles into a

more even pace instead of the uncontrollable rush. Sense comes back slowly, and with it, an acute, uncomfortable awareness of what just happened.

Well. At least he's not *crying*.

Scourge stands abruptly, tearing himself from Jules' arms. The robian raises a brow but doesn't protest. "Are you feeling better?" he asks instead. It's entirely casual, with no hint of pity, and Scourge hates himself a little for being pathetically grateful.

"Peachy," Scourge snaps and whirls around, hiking up his collar. Jules isn't screaming yet, so he clearly hasn't realized who he is, and Scourge is in no hurry to correct him. Honestly, this hedgehog's stupidity knows no bounds.

"Well." The robian stands up, reaches for a grocery bag that Scourge only just realized was there, and adds, "Stay safe, son."

Scourge's vision briefly whites out from fury. "Don't *call* me that," he snarls and takes off running before Jules can reply.

He finds a secluded place in a lonely corner, throws his warp ring, and promises himself that he'll never go back.

Scourge does some research.

It's called a panic attack, apparently. Common among soldiers, which is probably why Jules knew what to do - he said he'd been on the front lines, hadn't he? *Common among victims of PTSD*, the website says, and Scourge scoffs and closes the tab. Trauma - ridiculous. Scourge doesn't *do* trauma. If anything, he gives it to other people.

He's still snickering at his joke when Hawk comes in to tell him that Finitevus called in with another job. Normally, Scourge would tell him to screw off, but he's offering a massive stack of Anarchy beryl in return - something they've been in short supply of since they ditched Moebius.

Scourge's body itches at the thought of going super again. He accepts.

Thirty minutes later, they're waist-deep in smashed Eggman bots and struggling to fend off a fresh wave while Fiona and Hawk bicker over the terminal.

"I'm telling you, if we do that, we'll get locked out of the system entirely!" Fiona snaps.

Hawk throws up his hands. "Fine! Ignore me! It's not like you *literally just have to enter the code or anything!*"

Scourge spindashes down the line of Eggpawns, smashing through them like paper. He hits the wall at the right angle to bounce right off and uncurls in midair to land on his feet.

"Wrap it *up,* guys!" he yells and ducks beneath a stray *kunai*. "Watch it, Lightning!"

"Thought you were supposed to be the fast one," Lightning calls back.

"And I thought *you* were supposed to be able to aim!"

"I can." Lightning flicks a wrist and Scourge drops backward into a roll to avoid the next *kunai* that comes his way. When he springs back onto his feet, ready to chew out the idiotic trigger-happy lynx, there's a Badnik pinned to the wall right where he'd been standing. Lightning shoots him a smug grin.

"Right back atcha," Scourge mutters and barrels through the cluster taking potshots at Hawk and Fi.

"Ugh, fine!" Fiona shoves Hawk away and starts typing furiously.

Scourge drops another five Badniks and skids to a stop as an Egg Launcher smashes through the wall directly in front of him. *"Fiona!"*

"Give us a *minute*," Hawk snarls back.

The Launcher brings its arms down to eye level and Scourge leaps into the air as its targeting system locks on - and then Fly drops out of nowhere onto on its shoulders. "Need help?" the frog giggles (sweet *Chaos* Scourge hates him) and rips the thing's head off. Scourge blitzes right through its chest.

As its body slumps bonelessly to the floor, another Launcher steps through the wall behind it... and another one. And another. *Chaos*.

"If those things unload all those missiles in here, we're going to have a problem," Lightning says, echoing Scourge's own thoughts.

"Out of the way," Simian grunts, swinging the first bot's disembodied missile launcher-slash-arm onto his shoulder and taking aim.

"Are you nuts, man?" Scourge yells. "Didn't you hear Lightning? You fire that thing and this whole building's going down!"

"Better have the exit ready, then," Simian returns evenly.

"Got it!" Fiona announces, jumping up from the terminal with a chip in hand. Hawk follows, looking severely disgruntled. "Turns out we really *did* just have to enter the code. Hah."

"I *told* you," Hawk begins, but Fiona waves him off.

"You were right *once*, don't go getting a big head. You got the ring ready, sweetie?"

"Everyone over here! You miss the ring, we're leavin' you behind!" Scourge doesn't wait for a response and throws the warp ring. The portal spins into existence, glistening faintly in the electric light, and they all pile in. Simian fires off a final missile salvo before the ring vanishes and they tumble haphazardly into the Doc's lair to the sound of the entire base going up.

For a second, no one moves, too tired and bruised and tangled together to bother getting up. Lightning sighs heavily from the bottom of the heap. Scourge laughs.

"I trust you have what I asked for?" Finitevus asks from *literally* two feet away, and Scourge isn't even going to question how he knew where they'd end up. After all, they *are* at his mercy inside his weird evil lair, and Scourge knows how to be tactful.

Scourge props himself up on an elbow. "So do you like, *practice* being creepy, or is it natural?"

Without looking, Fiona smacks him in the back of the head.

"Ow!"

"We have it," Fiona says, extricating herself from the tangle. Scourge considers tripping her as she walks past, decides against it, and settles for hooking his ankle around Hawk's heel as he stands up. The bird goes down with a satisfying squawk right on top of Lightning and the ensuing chaos lets Scourge hop up onto his own feet.

Fiona ignores it.

"All the files relating to the roboticization process are on this USB,"

she says, holding it out. Finitevus takes it and, after a moment's inspection, slips it into his robes.

"So why'd you want that, Doc?" Scourge asks, adjusting his sunglasses. "Woulda thought that robot stuff wasn't quite your style."

"It is true that roboticization is a perversion of the natural order and representative of that which I seek to destroy," Finitevus concedes. "But I am not opposed to much that will give me the advantage against my nemeses. And I must admit the idea of enslaving your opponent's will to your own has a certain... charm."

Scourge and Fiona exchange a look - of the *literally why is he like this* and the *why do we talk to him again* variety - and Scourge shoves his hands in his pockets and steps up. "Uh... yeah, man. Totally. *Anyway*, if we're done here, can we have the beryl now?"

"Of course. But first, I have one more task for you."

Scourge scoffs disbelievingly. "Are you kidding? The deal was we break into Eggman's lab, steal your stupid information, and hand it over. We've done that. It took like *forever* and it was a *massive* pain in the butt the whole time, we are *not* adding anything else onto that and that's *final*."

"...I'll double the amount of beryl."

Scourge hesitates.

... which is how they ended up here. Scourge crouches on the windy rooftop, tugging his dumb fancy suit jacket closer and hoping idly that something happens soon. "Can we go in yet?" he asks.

Hawk, who's busy adjusting his own disguise, shakes his head. "You really have no patience at all, do you?"

"Nope!" Scourge tugs on his overly-tight tie and mostly just makes it worse. "How 'bout now?"

"If you were any good at infiltration, Fiona would've let you go in already," Hawk says. He's typing on his communicator, syncing all their devices into something they can actually use. It's not that Hawk's particularly adept at technology, or anything; it's just that all the rest of them are so abysmal at anything electric that tech duty usually falls to him or Fiona. "Unless Plan C falls through, you're not headed in 'till

the last minute."

Scourge sighs loudly, letting his feet dangle off the edge of the building. "I could just walk in and grab him. They wouldn't even see me coming. Then we wouldn't have to spend a million years sitting out in the cold."

Hawk doesn't look up. "And then Sonic would pursue, and then we'd have to fight him off while trying to kidnap a geriatric former soldier *without* killing him. Which, given our previous track record..."

The bird trails off and Scourge grimaces. Yeah. They'd given up on kidnappings for a *reason*. They wouldn't have even considered this one if not for the offer of Anarchy beryl - which has been in extremely short supply recently, given they can't hop dimensions without instantly snagging Zonic's individual attention. And it's not like Scourge isn't flattered that the self-important dimensional cop will drop everything for a chance at catching him, but he's not planning on seeing the inside of Zone Jail ever again.

Anyway. It's a small blessing that Zonic hasn't come looking for them personally, or sent Sonic after them, but it's one Scourge isn't willing to throw away just for a power-up. Thus the kidnapping mission.

Scourge swings his legs contemplatively and longs for Fiona to hurry up so he can bash some heads.

Right on cue, their communicators ring. "Alright, boys," Fiona's voice comes through a little tinnily. "You ready?"

"*Heck* yeah," Scourge says immediately.

"Ready to go whenever," Hawk confirms.

"Roger. Meet me where we agreed." The comms unit crackles and goes silent. Scourge hops up and starts stretching quickly, trying to limber up his half-frozen muscles. Hawk sets his communicator down and picks the lock on the trapdoor they'd been sitting next to. Once it's open, they slip down a small flight of stairs and through an empty hallway. At the end, they take a right through another hall and stop outside a janitor's closet.

Scourge raps on the door. "Knock, knock," he says.

There's a moment of silence. Then Lightning opens the door. "Hurry up," he whispers, peering over their shoulders.

Scourge clicks his tongue in disappointment. "Dude, you're supposed to say 'who's there.'"

"Yeah, Lightning," Fiona says from inside. "You're ruining the script."

"I- what?" Lightning sputters. "You people are so immature. Simian, can you tell them to shut up?"

There's a good fifteen seconds of judgemental silence. "...you should've said 'who's there.'"

Lightning rolls his eyes and Scourge pushes past him into the room. Simian nods as he enters and Fly, who's doing something he can't quite make out, cackles in a corner. Scourge spreads his arms wide. "Alright, I'm here now, the party can start!"

"Good to have you," Fiona says. She's sitting on an overturned bucket, one ankle folded over her knee and eyes glued to her phone. "Alright, so Plan A failed."

"Yes!" Scourge cheers, pumping a fist in the air.

Fiona shoots him a glare. "We weren't able to get him away from his bodyguards and the speech is about to start soon. I didn't want to do this in front of a crowd, but we may not have a choice. Right now, we only have to deal with the normal security and Sonic. After the ceremony, they're going to meet up with a bunch of Sonic's friends before going back home to New Mobotropolis."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait, then?" Simian asks, folding his arms.

Fiona shakes her head. "No for two reasons. We can handle the normal security easily, especially if we use the crowd for meatshields while Scourge is distracting Sonic. Sonic's friends are, frankly, a much greater threat than the security, and they will *not* be holding back. And if we wait until they go back to New Mobotropolis, we have that... *woman* to deal with."

Everyone shudders at the mention of Nicole. Their last attempt on New Mobotropolis is *not* a memory anyone wants to relive.

"So if we use the crowd for cover and Scourge's able to distract Sonic for long enough, this is doable," Fiona resumes. "We'll just have to time it right. And we can *not* let Sonic know our target at all costs. If he realizes we're trying to kidnap his uncle, he won't let the old man out of his sight, and our job will get a *lot* harder. Got that?"

A quick briefing on everyone's roles later and it's time to go. Scourge starts to follow the guys out the door and is caught short by Fiona's hand on his wrist. "Sweetie, can I talk to you for a second?" she asks and drags him back inside before he can answer.

She turns him loose and Scourge spins around, rubbing his wrist. "Alright, if this is about what I think it's about-"

"Don't worry, I'm not yelling at you. Just..." she trails off to stare at him.

Scourge tries not to fidget and goes for a confident smile, propped up against the wall. "Babe, don't worry about me. This'll be a lark."

"It's... you know." Fiona shrugs and apparently decides to just go for it. "You've been having issues about your dad. I need to know if that'll affect your performance here."

"What?" Scourge is almost kind of offended. If it was anyone but Fi asking, he *would* be offended. "Babe, my uncle was a total nutjob. Like, worse than my old man. No issues here."

Fiona looks at him a second longer. "Alright," she says at last. "If you say so. I'm counting on you."

She brushes past him on her way out, squeezing his hand on the way, which is nice since she's weird about stuff like that. Scourge follows a minute later.

I require one more thing for my research, Finitevus had said. *Charles the Hedgehog. Inventor of the roboticization process. He is receiving an award for his technological advancements in Central City in two days. Bring him to me alive and you will have your full reward*.

Scourge scans the crowd for Charles now, leaning on the fancy railing of the fancy indoors balcony overlooking the fancy banquet hall. There's a name for a balcony like this - a mezzasomething - but he can't remember what it is. Maybe Fiona would know.

Scourge tugs at the collar of his unbearably fancy suit jacket and longs for his sunglasses.

He'd told Fiona the truth earlier - his uncle was a wackjob. Paranoid, jittery, simultaneously ravenous for power and terrified of it - no one had liked him, least of all his nephew.

Jules had liked him, probably. Enough to give him a home and a laboratory for his crazy experiments and to turn a blind eye when they started getting darker and more deadly. That had gone on up until Charles had invented a machine that turned moebians to robots, and its first (unwilling) test subject had been Jules.

Yeah. After Ivo managed to save Jules' life, they'd put a stop to that *real* quick.

They'd told Scourge that Charles had gone far away to someplace he could be happy. He still remembers that scene - Jules crouching down before him with mournful eyes, one arm cold and stiff where the roboticization process had gotten it before Ivo had pulled him out. His flesh hand had been warm and comforting on his shoulder, and Scourge had been so distracted by the touch that he hadn't even cared that his uncle was gone. He'd faked tears just to get Jules to stay with him a little longer.

Scourge shakes his head wildly, dissipating the memories. Anyway, it was painfully obvious in hindsight that Charles had either been jailed or executed for treason. Not that Scourge would have cared either way. Mostly, he's just vaguely curious to see what Charles is like in this world. Still a mad scientist, or something more benevolent?

A mass of whispering erupts at the main entryway of the hall. Scourge straightens up.

A bunch of bodyguards in black enter, followed by a few people who could be family or friends. Sonic's there, obviously, and next to him can only be Uncle Charles.

Scourge doesn't really remember his uncle; he was, after all, a kid when the guy vanished, and he avoided him whenever possible. But the face before him is undeniably like his own. He has the same sloping forehead, the same pointed muzzle. Honestly, he looks exactly like Sonic with a mustache.

Scourge leans forward, intrigued, as the old guy says something that has Sonic pitching forward in laughter. It's weird, seeing him. Not like seeing Jules, or even like seeing the mom. Just... weird.

Not the kind of weird that Fiona's worried about, thank Chaos. No, he'll have no problems handing *this* schmuck over to the Doc.

Charles and his little squad sit down in the front row while the bodyguards split up to cover the exits. Scourge tracks their positions

automatically, mostly focused on the target. Charles claps his nephew on the back and leans over to whisper something in his ear. Scourge looks away with a sneer.

The ceremony starts. A bunch of people Scourge doesn't know talk about a bunch of things he doesn't understand, blah blah blah. Scourge yawns and taps a tattoo on the railing with his claws. Luckily, all the civilians seem to have gone down to the seating area, so he's alone on the balcony. As long as the security doesn't notice him, he should have no problem staying under the radar until it's time to make his move. Until then, he amuses himself trying to find the rest of the Destructix hidden in the crowd.

Down below, the speeches start wrapping up. Charles ruffles his nephew's quills one last time and heads up to the stage. Scourge straightens up as he accepts his award and takes the mic.

"First, I'd like to thank you all for being here today," the hedgehog says. Scourge taps his foot impatiently. "I know it's a bit of a long way for a lot of you - we've got some visitors from Holoska, even! - and it means a lot to me that you'd take the time to make it here today. So thank you."

Ugh, so boring. Can't Fiona hurry up? At this rate, they'll be doing the audience a favor by sparing them all this drivel.

"- of the University of Spagonia for funding my research and going out of his way to help me whenever I needed it. Thank you, old friend."

Scourge taps his communicator and almost jumps when it crackles to life.

"Alright, everyone's in position," Fiona says. "On my mark, Scourge, you're going to distract Sonic. Jump down there, challenge him to a fight, anything. His sole concern needs to be beating you up."

"All he has to do is be himself and Sonic'll be jumping at the chance to tear him a new one," Lightning interjects. "Works on me."

"Oh, shut up," Scourge says. "Fiona, tell him to shut up."

"...well, he has a point."

Lightning's amused huff is audible over the comm. Scourge rolls his eyes. Traitors, all of them.

Fiona's voice goes serious. "But for real. Get him mad and get him out of here. Make him chase you 'till I call you back, and don't give him a second to realize there's more going on. If he comes back here before we're done, it's over. Okay?"

"I got it handled, babe," Scourge says. "Worry about yourself."

"Believe me, I am." The comms go silent a second later. Scourge stands up, shakes the stiffness from his limbs, and hops up to crouch on the railing. It's showtime.

On stage, Charles is still talking. Does the hedgehog not know how to shut up? "And finally, I'd like to thank my family, who loved and supported me every step of the way, up to and including being here with me today as I accept this award. Sonic, my amazing nephew - you've grown so much and, while I wasn't there for all of it-"

Well, that's enough of that. Scourge leaps into the air, curls up, and lands a perfectly executed homing attack on the podium. Splinters, chunks of wood, and a massive dust cloud fly everywhere. Someone in the audience screams, and behind him he can hear Charles stumbling back and coughing furiously.

"Uncle Chuck!" In the front row, Sonic rockets to his feet and dashes forward, only to come skidding to a stop. As the dust dissipates, Scourge grins. He can *feel* the light glinting off his fangs.

"Long time no see, *faker*," Scourge spits. He pulls his sunglasses out of the stupid suit jacket's pocket and slides them on with a flourish. "Can't exactly say it's a pleasure seeing you... then again, I always look forward to a chance to kick your butt."

"Wh- Scourge?" the blue idiot sputters. The shock only lasts a matter of seconds before fading, as the flabbergasted expression turns into something more like a smirk. "Well, well. I haven't heard from you since I *demolished* you and left Zonic to drag your sorry carcass away. Did they let you out on good behavior?"

Good behavior. *Hah.* As if Sonic knows *anything* about what goes on in Zone Jail. "Please. I smashed my way out of there the first week. The Zone Jail's in shambles; just ask Zonic! Oh wait - *you can't.*" He laughs.

Sonic's smile slips a notch and the quills on his back bristle. "What happened to Zonic?"

Scourge keeps laughing.

"Alright, pincushion. Maybe you'll tell me when I beat it out of you!" Apparently done talking, Sonic curls up into a spindash. Scourge, still laughing, topples off the wrecked podium and leaves Sonic to smash into the stage where he'd been standing. People are screaming, someone's escorting Charles off the stage, and Scourge is *reveling* in the chaos.

"Slowing down, blue boy?" he mocks him. "You'll never find out about your stupid friend if you can't even touch me." Zonic's perfectly fine, actually, unless you count the truckload of paperwork Scourge saddled him with after his escape from Zone Jail. Not that *Sonic* needs to know that, 'cause if anything ticks him off, it's a threat to one of his friends.

And, true to form, Sonic snarls wordlessly and Scourge knows he's got him.

"You're looking kind of slow today - let's see if those legs of yours still work," Scourge calls over his shoulder and takes off. The world blurs around him as he taps into his speed, rockets between panicked partygoers and confused waiters and angry bodyguards. Out of the corner of his eye, he briefly spots Fiona crouching behind a pillar before she's blown away in his wake. Like this, outside sounds, sights, everything drops away, leaving him alone with himself and the wind.

It's nice. Peaceful, even.

And then the only other being who can keep up with him barrels into his side, sending them tumbling over each other right through the big open doors outside. Scourge lands a kick to Sonic's chest, sending him spinning away, and sprints down a sidestreet towards the marketplace. A moment later, the sound of footsteps running at 300 mph picks up behind him.

Scourge grins. The plan's working, then - Sonic's so ticked that he hasn't even stopped to wonder why Scourge isn't stopping to fight, or why he crashed the party in the first place. Now he just has to play this out 'till Fiona's done.

"Been slacking your exercise regimen lately? 'Cause I thought you were faster than this!" Scourge calls out.

"That so?" Sonic returns. The sound is unexpectedly close and Scourge looks back to see Sonic running only a few paces behind him. "I could say the same for you."

Scourge growls and vaults a fruit cart, sending it flying with a back

kick. Sonic dodges the cart and dives through the onslaught of flying fruit, coming up without a scratch. Scourge's gained a precious few seconds, but in a contest of speed, those seconds mean everything. He blocks Sonic's path - kicking over trash cans, dodging in front of moving cars, knocking a baby out of its mother's arms with a well placed swipe. Sonic dodges the trash cans, goes over or around the vehicles, and loses a good fifteen seconds saving the baby. By the time they've cleared the marketplace, Scourge is about thirty feet ahead and gaining.

"What's wrong?" Sonic yells. "Scared of a little fight?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Scourge yells back. "Dunno 'bout you, but I'm not wasting my time fighting someone too slow to keep up!" Up ahead, a pile of trash bags is stacked against a sloping wall, reaching up to the edge of the roof. Scourge leaps up in a single bound and sprints along the rooftop. Behind, the trash bags crinkle as Sonic races up, and tiles creak as the hedgehog fights for balance. Scourge snorts and picks up speed.

The rooftop run is fraught with near-misses and almost-falls. This area of town has a mixture of buildings; some are modern and boxy, with flat tops, but there's a number of older structures with pointed tile roofs. Scourge skids down the sloping ridge of one of these, slips off the building, snags a flagpole on the way down and turns his fall into a launch point. He lands upright on the narrow ledge of a skyscraper and darts along the line of windows, flashing a mock salute at some goggle-eyed kid in its bedroom.

Sneakered feet hit the concrete behind him as Sonic pursues, grinning despite his ferocious eyes.

Scourge hooks a fast right as the ledge ends and drops down to the top level of the parking garage nestled against the 'scraper. Mostly he's planning on going back down to street level, but Sonic puts on a burst of speed and tackles him right there.

They roll head over heels across the concrete, colliding with a dusty pickup truck hard enough to dent in the side. Scourge throws himself out of the way and rolls onto his feet just as Sonic picks himself up. The blaring car alarm is the only sound as they stare each other down.

Sonic moves first. He doesn't bother curling up, just lunges fist first at Scourge's face. Scourge ducks the punch and goes in low for Sonic's solar plexus, narrowly dodging a knee to his face. Sonic slams his heel

down on Scourge's foot and drives an elbow into his neck. Scourge stumbles back, falling into a roll to avoid Sonic's left hook, and comes up on his feet with room to spare.

There's another moment of staring and circling as they pant heavily and pretend they're not.

And then Sonic steps something that crunches and looks down.

Scourge lunges. Sonic sidesteps him easily and snatches it up - and wait, Chaosdammit that's his *communicator*-

"Is this a *mic*?" Sonic asks disbelievingly and then the pieces click.

He stares at Scourge blankly, and Scourge can practically *see* his train of thought - comms means accomplices, accomplices means there's a plan, a plan means Sonic was intentionally drawn out here away from the ceremony, and if Sonic's out *here* then -

Then -

Scourge swears and moves to tackle Sonic but the idiot's already gone. Instinctively, his hand goes to his ear - "Fiona, he's coming your way, I-" No, wait, Sonic's got the communicator and it's broken anyway, dammit. The plan's falling apart and it's entirely his fault.

Well. It hasn't fallen apart *yet*.

Scourge takes off, running full-tilt after Sonic. The irony of the situation isn't lost on him, not that he appreciates it. Sonic's trail is a direct beeline back to the hall. It should be easy to follow, but for some reason Scourge can't catch up those last few feet.

"I thought you wanted to fight, you dingus!" Scourge snaps. "Make up your mind already, sheesh!"

"You tricked me," Sonic growls.

"Uh, yeah? I'm the bad guy. It's kinda what I *do*."

"What's your actual plan?"

"Thought you were gonna beat me up and find out?"

Sonic snarls and, impossibly, picks up speed. Scourge has to drop the conversation entirely to focus on just keeping up.

They hit the convention hall scarce minutes later. There's clearly a fight going on inside; explosions and the faint sound of screaming accompany the flood of people battering down the doors in their desperation to escape. The Destructix are clearly having fun... and more importantly, haven't escaped yet. *What on Moebius are they doing?!*

Sonic zips through the crowd, dodging panicking mobians with practiced ease. Scourge doesn't bother; he kicks one middle-aged cat into the heart of the rush and vaults over the resulting pileup without missing a step. "Babe! Hope you're wrapping it up in there!" he yells as they burst into the ceremony hall.

The Destructix are more than holding their own. The security has been almost entirely cleared out; fallen guards litter the area while none of their own are even scratched. Fiona, wielding a G.U.N. issue stun pistol, jerks up in surprise as Sonic skids into the room. "Scourge, you had *one job!*" she screeches.

"So did you!" Scourge rams into Sonic from behind, sending them both flying into a row of seating. Scourge comes out on top. "What happened to Ch- the target?" he asks, pinning Sonic down with an elbow to his throat.

"Escaped," Fiona says grimly. "We've already informed the Doc... and, uh, we have a new objective now."

Sonic makes a choked-off sound and Scourge leans down harder. Something shifts behind him but he ignores it. "Alright, what is it?"

Fiona hesitates.

And then cold metal claws clamp down around his shoulder and tear him off Sonic, lifting him bodily into the air. The hedgehog wheezes for breath on the ground, but Scourge isn't paying attention. He's not paying attention to anything anymore, because in front of him-

"What the *hell* are you doing here," Scourge breathes.

Artificial red eyes burn into his own. "Don't touch my son," says Jules, and the anger in his voice causes every limb in Scourge's body to lock up with instinctive fear.

Of course Jules is here, Charles is his brother, why wouldn't he attend the ceremony - hadn't the blasted hedgehog said as much during his speech? Scourge should've realized it then. This was a bad idea, they

need to get out of here, why did Scourge even come here in the *first* place-

Something in Jules' mechanical expression thaws.

The clawhold on his shoulder eases as he's lowered to his feet, but Scourge's brain is still spinning in circles. He's gone completely unresponsive, some part of him knows, but he can't *think*.

"Get *away* from him!" Fiona yells and plants a high kick right in the center of Jules' chest. The robian goes flying, pursued by Simian, and Hawk swoops down behind them to tackle Sonic away. "Babe," Fiona says, kneeling down beside Scourge, feeling frantically at his shoulder. "Did he get you?"

The world shifts a little bit back into place. "No," Scourge mutters. "Fiona, I don't-"

"Save it." Fiona's eyes are full of worry as she grabs his wrist and hauls him to his feet. "I think you need to sit this one out, sweetie."

"What? No." Scourge grips her hand like a lifeline. "I can fight. I can still fight."

"Scourge... the new target is Jules."

Something in his chest catches. Scourge stares at her, and around them, the noise of the battle seems to fade. "...what? Why?"

Fiona grimaces. "We lost the inventor of roboticization. Next best thing is its last survivor."

"No. We're not doing that." Scourge has no idea what he's doing, only that they *cannot* hand his- hand Jules over to Finitevus. He catches both her hands in his own and squeezes them tight. "Call off the mission, we're going home."

Fiona stares at him. "What? Scourge, you can't be serious! After all the work we've put into this? And what about the beryl?"

"We already got the beryl from the first mission. We'll be careful and save it until we can restock. We've gotten this far without any beryl at all, we don't need it that badly!" Scourge hesitates. "...Fiona, *please*."

It's the last word that breaks her. She knows how bad he hates saying it, knows how much this means to him that he's saying it now. Her

shoulders slump in defeat. "...fine. But you get to explain this to the Doc - and please, let's try to avoid burning *that* bridge again."

Scourge squeezes her hand one last time before letting go. "Thanks, Fi. And don't worry about the Doc; *I'll* take care of him."

"That's what I'm worried about," Fiona grumbles, but she's smiling. "Alright, team," she calls out, pulling out her warp ring. "Mission's off. We're going home."

"Wait, what?" Hawk asks and nearly gets clobbered by Sonic for his trouble. "Why?"

"Ask questions when we get home," Fiona says and throws the ring. As the portal *whooshes* open, Scourge turns to survey the troops. Lightning and Simian are slowly retreating back to the portal, fighting Jules every step of the way, while Hawk and Fly are trying without much success to fend off Sonic long enough to run.

Scourge spindashes into Sonic, knocking him off-balance. "Get to the portal, idiots!" To Sonic, he adds, "Sorry, but it looks like we're cutting this date short." If Chaos has even a drop of mercy in its unforgiving soul, Sonic will have been too thoroughly distracted by the fight to have overheard his exchange with Fiona.

And it looks like for once, his prayers are answered, because Sonic's grin, strained with exhaustion though it is, hints at nothing off. "I'm not letting you get away this time," he says and launches into another spindash. "I still have some questions for you to answer!"

"Then they'll have to wait for next time." Scourge ducks the attack and slams his heel into Sonic as he passes, boosting his momentum to slam into the opposite wall. "Alright, time to go!" he yells, scrambling for the portal. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the rest of the Destructix doing the same.

Fiona's already waiting at the portal, with one leg halfway through, and-

"-*aaaaaAAAUGH, WHAT THE HELL*," she screams and falls back, pinwheeling wildly.

"Fiona!" Scourge yells and then the world blurs briefly and he's at her side, hauling her to her feet. "Fi, what's-" and then he screams too, because Finitevus is literally *right there*, climbing through the ring like a monster in a horror movie.

The battle cuts off. A few feet away, a newly recovered Sonic skids to a stop, staring incredulously. The Destructix are sort of ranged out behind him, looking to Scourge and Fiona for the next move. And who knows where Jules is.

"*Dude*," Scourge says emphatically, putting a hand to his chest. "Don't *do* that."

"What are you *doing*," Finitevus hisses.

Scourge makes a show of looking around. "Uh, escaping? I mean, what does it look like?"

"I should have known better than expect you lot to pull through," Finitevus mutters, and *hey*, that's actually kind of offensive.

"Hey! Screw you, man!" Scourge yells, shaking his fist. "We're leaving 'cause we *want* to, not 'cause we're losing!" Fiona slaps a palm to her face.

"Oh? And what possible reason could you have to do that?" Finitevus asks, but he doesn't seem very interested in an answer, because his hands flare with dark energy a second later, and Scourge knows what that means.

"Scatter!" he yells and hits the ground with Fiona as a bolt of Chaos energy goes right over their heads. Fiona rolls out from under him as he leaps to his feet.

Sonic seems to have switched targets. Currently, he's hammering away at Finitevus' defenses, running his mouth the whole time. The ring portal is still open behind Finitevus, but they need to get the crazy echidna out of the way first.

Fiona, as usual, is two steps ahead. "You're going to need to team up with Sonic."

"What, seriously? Can't we just let Sonic take care of the Doc and ditch?"

She gives him a flat look. "I don't know how he did it, but Finitevus must have hijacked the ring's signal and keyed it to his lair. I need time to reset it before we can leave. Just, you know-" she waves a hand vaguely. "Move the fight away. Whale on Finitevus. Keep them both off my back long enough for me to work."

"Ugh. Fine." Scourge turns around on his heel. "Hey, loser!" he calls out, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Five minute truce?"

Sonic uncurls in midair long enough to yell, "Make it two!"

Fiona had better work fast, because this isn't going to take long. "Destructix, watch Fiona's back," he orders and throws himself into the fight.

Finitevus was clearly anticipating something like this, because he moves smoothly into defending against the both of them without hesitation. And it's - frustrating. Whenever Scourge throws a punch, a ring portal swirls into being in just the right place to take his hit. If he tries a kick, the same thing. And Chaos forbid he spindashes, or he'll wind up on the opposite side of the room (or, more accurately, slamming into Sonic).

Between the ring portals and the constant misdirection, the two minute mark passes and they haven't landed a single hit. The guy isn't on their level, exactly, but he's unpredictable with enough tricks that he could probably take either of them on their own. Against both of them, he doesn't stand a chance - or he *wouldn't* if Sonic would *get out of his way*.

"Dude, we're supposed to be working *together*!" Sonic snaps.

Scourge flicks his ear (it's been ringing since Finitevus dropped a portal that sent a spindashing Sonic on a collision course with Scourge's face) and ducks beneath a Chaos-infused punch. "Not *my* fault you can't keep up."

He sidesteps a second punch and follows up with a roundhouse kick that comes inches from the Doc's face before another ring portal intercepts. *Dammit.*

Sonic, of course, chooses that moment to go for a homing attack, which takes him right into the portal as Finitevus dodges. From somewhere on the other side of the room, the moron makes a faint *oomph* sound as the portal spits him out.

Scourge rolls his eyes and sweeps his legs under Finitevus' ankles, forcing the echidna to stumble back. "You make a remarkably disloyal minion," Finitevus says and drops into a portal.

On a hunch, Scourge spins around and slams a haymaker into Finitevus' face when the echidna reappears behind him. "Calling me a

minion was your first mistake, Doc," Scourge says. "I'm the *king*, baby."

Finitevus snarls and vanishes again. "I must wonder at the cause of this particular instance," his voice says. Scourge whirls around, fists up before him, but the scientist is nowhere to be seen. "You were, after all, so *eager* to serve at first. What changed your mind?"

"You really gotta learn the difference between *serving* and making a *deal*, bud," Scourge says. "This why your friends always leave you?"

Finitevus ignores him. "Nothing changed between then and now. Nothing... except *the target*." Something flickers in the corner of Scourge's eye and he starts to turn, but he's met with a blow to the jaw followed by one to the shin. Scourge crumples to his knee with a cry of pain and looks up to see Finitevus' Chaos-powered boot swing for his face-

And then someone's hand snags his wrist and they're *moving*.

The world blurs just a little as Sonic hauls him across the room at lightning speed to drag him behind an overturned table. Scourge clutches the lapels of his jacket and tries to force his racing heartbeat to settle. For a second, they just breathe.

"Okay, we need to coordinate," Sonic says belatedly.

"Don't tell me what to do," Scourge says, mostly on reflex.

Sonic rolls his eyes. "If you draw his fire, I'll go behind to take him offguard. Think you can do that?"

"What? No. *You* draw his fire and *I'll* sneak up behind him."

"Yeah, maybe I'd do that if I had any faith at *all* in your stealth. You aren't exactly *subtle*, bud."

Scourge thinks back to every mission that involved some level of sabotage/stealth/general sneakery and their inevitably disastrous ends and winces. Unfortunately, he has a point. "Fine, whatever. Don't mess this up, dweeb." A blast of chaos energy rocks the floor beneath their feet - time's up. Finitevus is here.

Scourge breaks for the left.

"Hey old man, having trouble keeping up?" He leaps into the air as Finitevus goes for a sweeping kick and curls into a spindash, aimed at

the scientist's head. Predictably, he sails right into a ring portal and falls out several feet away. In midair, he uncurls and kicks off the ground to rebound towards Finietvus.

The Doc raises his hands coated in Chaos energy and actually *catches* the spindash. For a moment, they war against each other - dark energy to living buzzsaw - before Finitevus shoves back and they break apart.

Scourge hits the ground in a crouch and lunges again. This time, he feints an uppercut followed up with a knee strike to the gut. The echidna stumbles back, but recovers almost instantly. As Scourge goes in for another strike, Finitevus snags his collar and yanks him off-balance, slamming him into the dirt. Scourge tries to wriggle out of his grip, but the Doc pins him to the ground with a hand on his throat and a knee on his chest.

"I can't say I haven't been waiting for this," the mad scientist breathes, and raises a handful of swirling black energy.

Scourge scrabbles helplessly at his wrist and wonders, briefly, if this is it.

And then a blue ball of spikes rockets out of nowhere, smacking into the back of Finitevus' head so hard the floor creaks when he faceplants. Scourge kicks him off and rolls back onto his feet, smacking away Sonic's outstretched hand. The echidna staggers upright, but his shield is broken and Sonic and Scourge poised on either side of him. The echidna eyes them warily, rings at the ready, and for a second no one moves.

"Got it!" Fiona's voice breaks the spell.

Sonic's concentration slips. Scourge can see it; the way his posture straightens slightly, the way he half-turns to face her. Finitevus sees it too.

And then Finitevus' hands are up, radiating dark energy, and Scourge drops into a defensive stance 'cause the blue buffoon can get himself killed if he wants but *Scourge* is going down fighting- but Finitevus isn't looking at either of them.

He's looking *behind* them.

At Jules.

Jules, who has no Chaos abilities, can't break the sound barrier on a whim, can't dodge bullets point-blank.

Jules, who both is his father and isn't, who's a machine but still alive, who stood across from Scourge in a dark room and didn't flinch though Scourge held his life in his hands, who loves his wife and child and wouldn't hesitate to die for either of them.

Jules, who would walk a random stranger through a panic attack on the street but can't dodge a Chaos spear if it's pointed at his chest.

Time slows down to a crawl. Scourge doesn't think.

He just moves.

The last thing he sees, as pain erupts from his chest like lightning and the world is drowned out by the black of corrupted Chaos energy, is the bright red of Jules' horrified eyes.

There's a beeping noise somewhere near his ear. Fiona's phone, probably (even though it sounds nothing like her alarm). Scourge reaches up to shut it off and is stopped halfway by the *clink* of cold metal.

...huh?

He opens his eyes to dim electric light and a pounding headache. There's a hard surface beneath his back, thin sheets around him, and a metallic chill around his wrists, ankles, and throat.

Through the haze, something about the last one feels familiar.

Beside him, something rustles, and a soft voice says, "Awake, then?"

"Dad?" Scourge mumbles foggily. For a moment he's eight again, in the hospital after a near-drowning, and his dad took a whole day off from work to rush to his bedside and hold his hand. It was the first time he'd seen him in a week.

Then reality catches up and reminds him that no, his dad is *dead* and whatever's going on here is something to worry about. The fog is gone in an instant.

Scourge's eyes snap open and he throws himself as much he can to the far side of the bed from the figure standing there now. Jules is there - a little scratched and dinged up but very much alive.

There's a flicker of something like relief inside him before Scourge stuffs it down and crushes it *very* firmly. Chaos, Fiona was right. He let his stupid hangups about this robian get out of hand, and now look what's happened - the mission went south, Scourge is chained to a hospital bed, the rest of the Destructix are nowhere to be seen, and worst of all, he made a *heroic sacrifice* like he's *Sonic* or something.

Chaos, Scourge is *never* living this one down.

"It's good to see you're moving around already," Da- *Jules* says in that same too-soft tone. "Some of the doctors were convinced you wouldn't live another day. I suppose any son of mine, even from another dimension, is just too durned stubborn to go out like that..."

"Don't," Scourge rasps.

Jules blinks at him. "Pardon?"

"*That.*" Scourge lets go of the bed's railing just long enough to gesture irritably. "I'm not your son. Don't *call* me that."

Instead of rearing back in offense or dropping the nice act altogether, Jules tilts his head slightly, as though in recognition. "Ah," he says after a moment. "So that *was* you."

Scourge freezes and tries to play it off. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That day in front of Chuck's diner," Jules says. "That was you. I wasn't sure, since you were still supposed to be in Zone Jail then."

"Chuck's diner? What?" Scourge forces a laugh. It comes out entirely fake and just a little unhinged.

"You had a panic attack," Jules continues, unperturbed. "I walked you through it. Honestly, at the time, I thought it was because of me."

It was *because of you*, Scourge wants to say. Instead, he asks, "Whaddya mean?"

Jules gestures vaguely to himself. "I'm a robian," he says. "Robotnik put New Mobotropolis through a lot when the roboticizor was still functioning. Plenty of people have had... adverse reactions to my body in the past. It's unfortunate but can't really be helped, except through time and patience."

...for some reason, that stings. Scourge pushes the thought away and snorts. "Sucks to be you. Don't see what that has to do with me."

"You did ask," Jules reminds him, which is fair. He supposes. They lapse into silence.

Scourge slumps against the bed, a little more relaxed with no attack evidently imminent, and holds up a hand to the light. The dangling cuff glints coldly. He can't reach the collar on his neck, but he suspects it shines the same way - like the inhibitors back at Zone Jail. "You guys already talked to Zonic, then?" he guesses.

He's not really expecting an answer, but Jules gives one anyway. "We did. He gave us that inhibitor collar you're wearing right now." *Nailed it.* "He wanted to take you back with him to Zone Jail right away, but with the condition you were in, we didn't want to risk moving you until you were stable."

Scourge flexes his fingers, watching the muscles move. He'd suspected already, given how drained he feels right now, but knowing that he's wearing the collar is... disheartening. That level of powerlessness is something he'd never wanted to feel again. "I'm stable now. So when will you be moving me?"

Jules hesitates. "Now that you're awake, we'll probably call Zonic to pick you up sometime tomorrow. It's nighttime right now."

"What? How long was I out?"

"Two days."

Two days, and he's still here? Either the Destructix got nabbed too (possible), are planning a rescue mission (unlikely), or ditched (most likely). That... also stings. A lot. He'd *liked* Fiona, and he was getting used to the rest of the idiots, too.

"What about my team?" he asks.

"Vanished. They tried to retrieve you but retreated when reinforcements arrived."

It doesn't mean much - he is, after all, their strongest fighter and tactically it makes sense to avoid losing him if possible - but it makes Scourge feel better to know they'd at least tried. He lets his hand fall back to the bed with a metallic jingle.

"I still don't understand," Jules says, and *Chaos*, why won't he shut up? Is this something inherent to Sonic's family? "Why did you save me?"

Scourge inspects the patterns of cracks on the ceiling. That one looks like Sleuth Dog's face. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he mumbles.

"You took an attack meant for me. That much concentrated Chaos energy would've killed me - it's likely the only reason you survived is because you're a very adept controller."

"Sounds like you already have an answer to me."

There's a brief pause. Scourge continues avoiding eye contact. "I do have an idea," Jules says softly. "But I'd like to hear a confirmation from your own mouth."

Scourge doesn't say anything.

What's he supposed to say - that every time he sees Jules some stupid, long-dead part of him longs for his approval? That Jules is dredging up memories better left buried? That when he saw his dad - any version of him - in danger, that his first instinct was to protect him, despite everything he'd done?

Ha. Yeah, right.

"Think what you want, old man." Scourge bares his teeth. "It doesn't mean anything. It was an accident."

Jules doesn't waver. "I think we both know that's not true."

Can't this guy take no for an answer? Scourge huffs and rolls over as much as he can so his back is toward Jules. "Leave," he says. *It's what you're best at, after all.*

"Sonic heard that you attacked the ceremony to kidnap Chuck."

Scourge has a sudden, sinking feeling he knows where this is going. "I don't care. Go away."

Jules marches on, implacable. "He said that halfway through, after Chuck escaped, Finitevus told you to switch targets. That the new target was me."

"Shut up!"

"And that when you heard I was in danger, you-"

"So I called it off, *alright*?" Scourge bolts upright. The handcuffs snap back against his wrists painfully and his ankles scream as the cuffs cut into his skin, but he's too furious and aching and raw to care. "Yeah, I called off the mission. Yeah, I took that stupid attack. It doesn't change anything! I'm still your enemy, I'm still going to kill Sonic, I'm still going to tear apart your world and everything you love! So *what* if I- if I..."

"Risked all that to save one broken-down, tactically unimportant robian?" Jules finishes quietly.

"Yes! No!" Scourge tries to bury his face in his hands and can't even do that, *damn* this tiny range of motion. "Will you *leave me alone?*" Metal glints in the corner of his eye as Jules reaches out a hand. Scourge growls deep in his throat until the hand is slowly drawn back.

Mercifully, the robian is silent while Scourge desperately tries to keep himself from falling apart. Chaos, what is *wrong* with him?

"What do you want from me," he mutters.

This time, it's Jules who looks away. "There's not much time before I have to call Zonic in," he says. "Before he left the first time, there was talk of... life in solitary confinement. Or execution."

Breathe. It's fine. Scourge has been in worse scrapes before. "I can see where the similarities between you and my dad come in," he says softly. Venomously. "*He* never hesitated to lock me away, either." Sure, it hadn't exactly been tossing him in a prison cell and throwing away the key, but the perpetual grounding to an empty mansion, the total abandonment of him to an endless stream of nannies... and then, of course, that fiasco right before he died.

Dads. So eager to foist their screwups on other people, wash their hands and move on.

"Doesn't any of this setup seem odd to you?" Jules asks abruptly.

Scourge blinks, thrown. "What? You hit your head somewhere, old man?"

"Think about it. You're a top-priority prisoner. You've broken out of *Zone Jail*. And yet your only security here is an inhibitor collar, some handcuffs, and a broken-down old robian."

...there's a trap here somewhere, Scourge *knows* it. "Yesss?" He eyes Jules warily. Is this some kinda reverse-psychology thing?

Jules laughs wearily. "You're not the only one with emotional ties he can't quite cut, son."

"Don't call me that," Scourge says reflexively before the weight of Jules' words catch up to him. "Wait, what? Are you saying-" and then he cuts off, because that's so ridiculous it shouldn't be said out loud.

"Yes," Jules confirms. "I volunteered for guard duty because I had to ask, first. To make sure for myself that something of my son is in there."

"I am *not* your *son*," Scourge snaps. Distantly, some part of him recognizes that he's being actively detrimental - that if he plays his cards right he could actually walk out of this free - but he's past that kind of rational behavior now. "You're chasing ghosts, old man! Stop looking for stuff that isn't gonna happen!"

"You're not my son," Jules agrees. "You're not my Sonic. But you're *a* Sonic, and somewhere... that potential for great good is inside you."

And isn't that exactly what Sonic had said on their last birthday - the day he'd finally ditched that lame Anti-Sonic moniker, had finally stepped out of Sonic's shadow into his own light - that all it'd take is a bit of decency, and Scourge would be just like him? The echo stills him.

"You're making a mistake," he says hoarsely. He's not going back to Zone Jail, he'll *die* before he goes back to that hellhole, but he *needs* Jules to understand this. "I'm not Sonic. I'm no hero. If you let me go, I'm just gonna go right back to doing what I did before. People will *die* because of you."

"No, they won't," Jules says, half-smiling. "I've done my research. The Destructix don't kill. You wreak havoc and destroy things, but... no bodies. I understand it's to avoid trouble with G.U.N.," he adds, holding up a hand to forestall Scourge's protests, "But you don't have a body count. That's important."

Shows what he knows - but Scourge can't bring himself to point out the obvious. "I still ruin lives," Scourge says instead. "There's other ways to kill people without holding a gun to their heads."

"I know. And that's where I'm being selfish." The half-smile turns into a full smile, but it's so sad and wracked with exhaustion and bitterness that Scourge has to look away. "I... I lost my son once. I can't help it... I can't watch a son of mine - from any universe - be destroyed while I can do anything to stop it. I'm not a good person, Scourge. I've lost too much to try. So I'm going to be selfish, just this once, and hope you don't make me regret it."

Scourge is silent. He's silent when Jules stands up and unlocks the cuffs, one by one. He's silent when Jules reaches up to his throat to unlock the inhibitor, and he's silent when it falls away and power rushes freely beneath his skin once more.

His boots are on the floor, suit jacket draped over a chair. He pulls on the shoes and digs through the pockets until he finds his sunglasses, but leaves the jacket behind.

"Scourge," Jules says quietly, as Scourge pushes the window open. He hesitates over the window sill, half inside and half out.

If Jules asks him to stay, he doesn't know what he'll do.

But he doesn't. In the end, Jules looks down and whispers, "If you ever need somewhere to rest, my home is always open. Till then... be safe, son."

The words catch in Scourge's throat. He nods, wordlessly, and drops out of the window to land lightly on his feet on the ground below. For a moment, he dallies beneath the window, waiting for-

For...

He doesn't know. Scourge shivers in the cool night air and starts running.

...thanks, Dad.

He finds the base a few hours later, jogging to the next town over and hopping a train the rest of the way. When he walks in, the base goes dead silent.

Fiona leaps up from the circle of Destructix - planning a rescue mission, he later finds out - and tackles him, hugging and pounding him in equal measure. She cries a little too, which he only discovers when she points out he's tearing up himself. The Destructix surround

them, yelling over each other and clapping him on the back until Simian picks them all up in a group hug. It's at that point that Scourge declares he's done with all this mushy stuff and if they don't knock it off he won't bother coming back next time. Fiona announces that if there is a next time he won't have to worry about coming back because she'll kill him first, and Simian gives them all one last squeeze before turning them loose.

Scourge retrieves his leather jacket with a sense of great relief and they all end up watching another trashy samurai movie, which Lightning ruins again. Fiona holds him tight the whole time and doesn't chew him out like he deserves, for which Scourge is unendingly grateful.

He doesn't go back to the house. He pulls jobs with the Destructix, they beat up on Sonic and his lackeys, they have one run-in which Finitevus that they come off much worse for. And they watch crappy movies, eat ridiculous amounts of junk food, and get personally banned from every arcade and amusement park across the continent. He's... not gonna lie, it's actually pretty fun.

But in the back of his head, the house is always there. The robian bustling around the empty kitchen in a pink apron. The scent of pancakes frying. *Till then... be safe, son.*

It takes a long time - months of denial, of wondering and longing and furious self-restraint - but he caves eventually.

He shows up on a morning he knows Sonic and his mom won't be there. He doesn't knock on the door, or ring the bell. Mostly, he just hovers outside, unable to work up his nerve to do anything.

He's about to leave when the door swings open. Jules stands there, looking exactly the same as he did that night by the hospital bed, with eyes too soft for his wayward not-son. Scourge, half-frozen on the sidewalk, searches for something to say and comes up empty. They stare at each other silently.

Scourge shoves his hands in his pockets and forces back the lump in his throat. "I was in the area, so I dropped by," he mutters. "Don't think this means anything."

Jules looks at him for a long moment and Scourge forgets to breathe. Slowly, softly, his dad smiles. "Welcome home, son."

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